

*The Pacifist Option*, by Alexander Webster

reviewed by [Alain Epp Weaver](#) in the [August 30, 2000](#) issue

In the ecumenical conversation on war and peace, the voice of Orthodox Christianity has too often gone underrepresented. Alexander Webster helps fill this gap, arguing that "a distinctive form of pacifism has endured in the quiet corners of monastic communities and individual souls." However, his fine elucidation of this Orthodox pacifist trajectory is marred by theoretical and theological moves which most Christian pacifists will find highly questionable.

Webster's treatment of pacifism in scripture and in patristic writings is sound, if not original. But his exposition of how the concepts of theosis, askesis, philanthropia, mysteria and sobornostis can be deployed to provide an Orthodox theological framework for understanding Christian pacifism is a vital contribution to the ecumenical pacifist conversation. The Orthodox emphasis on theosis, or deification, in particular should challenge the forms of Christian pacifism that emphasize obedience to divine commands to remember the telos of that obedience.

Webster also offers helpful studies of pacifist strands within canon law, hagiographical writings, devotional literature, and the tradition of "Russian kenoticism." From the latter, he lifts out Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov* for extended treatment.

Unfortunately, the benefits of Webster's study are offset by flaws both major and minor. For example, he incorrectly accuses selective conscientious objectors of "mixed motives and confused values," thus demonstrating his failure to recognize selective objection as a necessary by-product of taking the justifiable-war tradition seriously. Furthermore, pacifists used to facing patronizing condescension or benign indifference in ecumenical conversation will be puzzled by Webster's claim that pacifists like the late John Howard Yoder "control the religious journals and the public relations organs of the mainline Protestant denominations."

These faults, however, are minor compared to the structural problems with Webster's argument. He has a fondness for typologies which, unfortunately, obscure more than they illuminate. Relying on Edward Long Jr.'s distinction between

"vocational" and "activist" pacifism, Webster perpetuates a false dichotomy between "nonresistance" and "nonviolent resistance." Upholding the "vocational," or "nonresistant," form of pacifism as the properly Christian kind, he insists that true Christian pacifism can only be a personal witness disconnected from social activism. Webster does not seem to recognize how someone like John Yoder was able to champion nonviolent direct action without becoming obsessed with efficacy. The activist witness of Jim Forrest and the Orthodox Peace Fellowship also challenges his typology.

Webster's revamping of Ernst Troeltsch's church-sect typology into a sect-type, worldly-type and churchly-type schema is also unconvincing. Predictably, the sect type is associated with separation and pacifism, while the church type is associated with an organic relationship between church and state and the justifiable-war tradition. The worldly type, which Webster relates to the holy war tradition, is rejected as an option for Orthodox Christians, although Webster acknowledges the "checkered" history of Eastern Orthodoxy in this regard. Again, better acquaintance with Yoder's work would have helped Webster question the continuing usefulness of this church-sect typology and see that pacifism need not result in total separation between church and state.

Most Christian pacifists will also have doubts about Webster's appeal to the "antinomy" of the Trinity to justify the "antinomy" of upholding "two simultaneously valid fundamental moral trajectories," namely, "justifiable war" and "absolute pacifism." The appeal to the Trinity is theologically questionable. The orthodox trinitarian affirmation of the identity of Jesus and God should issue in an affirmation of the universal normativity of Jesus' way of peace, rather than in an affirmation of the "simultaneous truth" of "two irreconcilable moral positions." "At the eschaton," Webster writes, "every Orthodox will be expected to fulfill the spiritual-moral ideal of absolute pacifism." Despite its flaws, Webster's study will offer theological resources from a rich heritage to those Christians, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox, who believe that Christians are called to follow the way of peace here and now.